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Spirit Women, Church Women, and Passenger Women

Femmes esprits, femmes d'église, femmes de passage : christianisme, genre et changement culturel en Mélanésie

Mujeres espíritus, mujeres de iglesia, mujeres de paso: cristianismo, género y cambio cultural en Melanesia

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Christianity, Gender, and Cultural Change in Melanesia

The literature on cultural transformation in Melanesia has grown rapidly over the last decade. Bucking a tradition of neglect, anthropologists of the region have increasingly turned their attention the study of change. The most general argument of this paper is that the development of work in this area has opened up opportunities for new kinds of comparative work focused on examining different kinds of processes of change. Where once Melanesianists almost exclusively compared traditional institutions and ideas, we are now in position to compare the ways these institutions and ideas change in the face of the arrival of new ones, and to ask a new set of questions. Are processes of change general across the region? If they are not, what accounts for the differences? Do different colonial histories account for them? Or exposure to different kinds of new institutions and ideas? Or do differences in traditional institutions and ideas drive change in divergent ways? Were we to ask questions such as these, the anthropology of Melanesia might one day become as well known for its contribution to the study of cultural change as it has been for its exploration of the social dynamics of small scale societies and its documentation and analysis of radical cultural difference.

In this article, I want to contribute to this new orientation by looking at processes of change brought about by conversion to Christianity and in particular at the ways in which Christianity has transformed gender relations. Christian missionaries have long understood their efforts to be of particular benefit to women, who they believe will not only be saved by conversion, but also emancipated from what the missionaries take to be excessive male domination. Although it is not difficult to identity the self-justifying aspect of this liberationist rhetoric, we can also take it to point to an area where missionaries at least hope their presence will have a great transformational impact. And when the missionary's own claims are set alongside the very common observation that in Christianity "women outnumber men" throughout the world (Woodhead, 2001: 73), there is a strong case to be made that the study of how Christianity

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transforms gender relations ought to be important for the study of Christianity and cultural change more generally.

In this article, I will look at two cases in which Christianity has transformed gender relations. Both cases have been studied by anthropologists who have also laid out explicit models of the ways in which cultural change has followed conversion in the societies they have studied, and this makes it easier to carry out the comparison of the two cases in a thorough way. The two different processes of change, I will argue, have led to different outcomes in relation to gender, and this suggests that while Christianization does allow for changes in gender conceptions and relations, it does not on its own determine the direction these changes will take. Lest this rather open ended conclusion lead us to assume that this conclusion indicates that Christianity has little effect on processes of change, however, I also introduce a third case in which a great deal of modernizing change unaccompanied by thorough Christianization can be shown to have opened up a new possibilities for male and female behavior, but without changing the core shape of traditional gender values. I will argue that this suggests that even if Christianity does not introduce wholly predictable changes in gender relations among all people who take it up, it can be seen to have a special role to play in fostering change in this domain.

Focused as this paper is on examining a number of cases, its structure has some of the features of the famous anthropological method of "controlled comparison." But I should confess at the outset that it does not fully succeed in these terms. I have not been able to go into all of the differences in cultural background, societal size, and historical experience that hold between the three societies I am considering, nor to assess how these, rather than the factors I do consider, might account for the outcomes of change that I am comparing. Rather than a case of controlled comparison meant to definitively prove a point, this paper is an exploration of some of the ways Christianity can be seen as central to the transformation of gender relations in Melanesia. Its success will have to be gauged in relation to the questions it opens up, rather than the ones it answers.

Spirit Women: Christianity and Gender among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea

The first case I will consider is based on my own fieldwork and concerns the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. The Urapmin are a group of approximately 390 people living in the Sandaun Province. They are part of the Min or Mountain Ok group of cultures. In 1977 a charismatic revival moved through the southern part of the Min province and quickly made its way to Urapmin. In the course of the year that followed everyone in the community converted. Since that time, the Urapmin have understood themselves as a completely Christian community.

I have told the story of their conversion elsewhere and will not review it here (Robbins, 2004a). Instead, I want to focus on what their turn to Charismatic Christianity has meant for Urapmin ways of thinking about and enacting gender relations.

One of the most striking outcomes of Urapmin conversion has been the rise of a class of Holy Spirit mediums who are known as "Spirit women" (Spirit meri, *Sinik unang* [1]). The Spirit woman role was established very early on in the process of revival and its advent has to count as one of the most dramatic early changes the movement wrought. In terms of what the role entails, Spirit women are mediums who are regularly able to become possessed by the Holy Spirit when their clients visit them. Once they are possessed, the Spirit "shows" them which indigenous nature spirits (*motobil*) are making their clients sick and helps to chase these spirits away. Less commonly, people ask Spirit women to consult the Holy Spirit concerning the whereabouts of lost objects. Also infrequently, Spirit women perform possession rituals in which the Spirit works to permanently rid specific areas of indigenous spirits in order to make them safer for people to live and work in. Finally, Spirit women sometimes perform rituals in which they ask the Spirit to foster the success of mineral prospecting efforts that sporadically take place on Urapmin land by encouraging the nature spirits to give up the minerals they are thought to possess.

As a class of religious specialists, the Spirit women are in most respects unprecedented in Urapmin history. Before the Urapmin conversion to Christianity, some older men had reputations as diviners who could look at leaves floating in water and discern which nature spirits were afflicting their clients. But beyond being similar to the Spirit women in their diagnostic role, these diviners were quite different. They did not become possessed (an unknown technique among the pre-conversion Urapmin), could not call on a greater spiritual power to help chase afflicting spirits away, and their role in Urapmin life and imagination appears to have been limited (it appears, for example, that they were completely in the shadow of the men who led the central the men's cult that constituted the most elaborated sector of traditional religion). [2] By contrast, the Spirit women

1. In the section of this article discussing the Urapmin, terms in the Urap language are given in italics while those in Tok Pisin, the primary lingua franca of Papua New Guinea, are underlined.

2. Probably the oldest Urapmin man alive at the time of my fieldwork had formerly been a diviner of this type. To my eye he was a striking figure—among other things, he was the last man in the community who continued to wear traditional cassowary quill nose ornaments. Yet others treated him primarily as a kindly old man—respected but with no air of sanctity about him. This contrasted with their treatment of former men's cult leaders, who they held to be formidable characters. This in part informs my assessment of the relatively minor place of traditional diviners, as does the very small role they play in ethnographies of other groups in the Min region that describe pre-conversion life in detail.

are prominent figures on the contemporary religious landscape, and their functions extend far beyond divinatory diagnosis to include healing and the management of the indigenous spirit world more generally. For most Urapmin, the rise of the Spirit women and the powers for good they are able to harness are some of the most important and welcome aspects of the present Christian Era, and Spirit women and their powers are central to how they think about their contemporary lives.

As novel as are the techniques and powers of the Spirit women, the fact that they are women is perhaps even more unexpected. Traditional Urapmin ritual life was almost wholly in the hands of men. All rites that involved people from beyond the family were undertaken by men. And most often these rites were carried out secretly, as there was a pronounced emphasis on the need to keep mythic and ritual knowledge secret from women. Women's engagement with the world of spirits and ancestors was for the most part limited to the practice of rites that in traditional anthropological parlance would be defined as "magic": that is, those carried out privately and for the benefit of the person who performs them (*i.e.* to help in the rearing of large, fatty pigs). There is no room to go into greater detail about traditional Urapmin religion here, but it perhaps suffices to say that it accords neatly with the well known picture of men's cult societies in other parts of the Min region (see Barth, 1975 and Jorgensen, 1981). Given this, the rise to great prominence of a class of female ritual specialists marks a major transformation in the way Urapmin handle gender in the religious domain. This raises the question: how did women, who once played such a small role in Urapmin religion, so quickly become central to their Christianity? [3] I have no one answer to this question, but want to canvass several of them before turning to a consideration of what the Spirit women role can tell us about changes in gender ideas and relations among the Urapmin.

People in Urapmin do not spontaneously speculate on why women have come to take on such a central ritual role in Urapmin Christianity. They do note that the first Spirit women they knew of was the wife of the principle at a local bible college in another part of the Min region. This man is widely thought to have

3. Important recent work in other areas of Papua New Guinea has begun to complicate the received picture of men's cults as religious institutions that completely exclude women as key participants (Bonnemere 2004a). As Bonnemere (2004b: 8) notes, this new work has not yet included detailed discussions of any groups in the Min (Mountain Ok) region. Both Bonnemere (2004b: 8) and Knauft (2004: 197) point out that in many societies in which the practice of men's initiation rituals have been discontinued, it is now difficult to collect material on women's participation in them. This was the case during my Urapmin fieldwork. My account, however, is based on what I was able to learn about traditional religion and on what I know from regional ethnography, which suggests that women were not central participants. In the comparative spirit of this article, it would be interesting if someone who has experience working in an area where more extensive participation by women in men's rituals has been documented might compare the way gender ideas have been transformed there with the cases I present here.

brought the revival to the area through his prayers, and it began at his college and spread out from there as students took it to their home communities. His wife is thus taken to have been the first to demonstrate what women were capable of in the Christian Era. Upon my probing, several people also suggested that God has given special powers to women because he favors the "weak." This was meant, I think, primarily in a physical sense: Urapmin people, both men and women, tend to see women as physically weaker. Furthermore, the few people who offered this suggestion noted that it also helped explain the existence of the one "Spirit man" in the Urapmin community. This Spirit man, who performs the same mediumistic rites as the Spirit women, is the one person in the community suffering from advanced leprosy and he is unable to walk. I report these two small pieces of local Urapmin reflection here in the interest of thoroughness, but must also admit that I have found it hard to work them into a very strong account of why women became important ritual specialists after the conversion of the Urapmin.

Turning to more analytic approaches to this question, a first answer might be to observe that the rise of the Spirit women fits a pattern common in societies like Urapmin in which people have converted to charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity. Among such Christians, men often dominate formal church roles (as they do in Urapmin), while women are expected to receive more gifts of the Spirit and thus to occupy roles such as lay preacher, healer, evangelist and prophet in which authority is based primarily on charisma (see Robbins, 2004b: 132 for references). Yet the fact that the role of women in Urapmin charismatic Christianity is in keeping with a wider trend among such churches does little to explain why they have taken up this role in the Urapmin case, and in particular it does not help us understand how they could have come to fill this role in a society in which women were previously so thoroughly excluded from holding public religious office.

To move closer to the specificities of the Urapmin situation, it is useful to explore a second analytic answer to our question, this one having to do with very general changes in the role gender differences play in Urapmin culture. As in many other Melanesian societies in which men's cults were prominent, and even in many in which such cults were not present or of great importance, gender difference was in traditional Urapmin culture something of a master opposition which served to structure difference in other domains such as that of food (where some foods were eaten only by men, some only by women), space (which was criss-crossed by men's and women's paths), the built environment (which features men's houses and women's houses), the division of labor (divided into men's and women's tasks), sociality in general (which was structured by a wide range of taboos on cross-sex contact), and, as we have already seen, the religious domain. In traditional Urapmin culture, gender was, as Eriksen (2008: 8) puts it for North Ambrym, Vanuatu (the next society I will consider in this paper), "the one difference that organizes other differences" (Eriksen is drawing here

on highly influential work of M. Strathern [1988]) Its power to do so was anchored in important cosmological and religious understandings that rendered uncontrolled contact between women and men profoundly dangerous both to individual men and to collective well being. If one can speculate on the basis of what we know about pre-Christian Min cultures, the fact that gender difference played such a prominent role in traditional Urapmin culture would have made it a topic of extensive discussion and elaboration.

By the time of my fieldwork, which began in January 1991, only fourteen years after the onset of the revival, the salience of gender difference as a master opposition in Urapmin culture had entirely disappeared. It had been replaced by the opposition between "black" people, like the Urapmin and others from PNG, and "white" people, like the Australian colonists, missionaries, and other westerners whom the Urapmin had met or come to know about (for a longer discussion of this argument, see Robbins, 2004a: 40-41, 171-173). Just as gender once organized Urapmin understanding of all manner of things, the black/white opposition now defined kinds of food, technology, knowledge, places, and ways of life. Christianity is not solely responsible for this change; the colonial process in its more explicitly political and economic forms was at least as important in bringing it about. But Christianity has contributed greatly to making the world shaped around this opposition coherent for the Urapmin. Christianity, as the Urapmin understand it, comes from the white world, and because Jesus is white, the black/white opposition too is cosmologically anchored, and this is what has allowed it to become a topic of constant discussion and elaboration today.

Christianity not only helped the Urapmin understand the world in black and white terms, it also did a great deal to make it possible for them to sideline gender as a key opposition by downplaying the extent and importance of gender differences. It did this most forcefully by insisting that the Urapmin drop all of their food taboos and the taboos that interdicted cross-sex contact that was not sexual in nature. As the Urapmin understand it, God does not want them to follow any taboos, and to do so would be tantamount to displaying one's lack of trust in the power of his protection against the illnesses that formerly afflicted violators. Gone with the taboos is the fine structure of distinctions between foods and paths that once allowed gender differences to ramify throughout daily life in Urapmin. And with the abandonment of traditional religion, gone too are the male rituals and the men's houses that once anchored gender differences in cosmological dramas that reinforced their salience. In their place is a Christian insistence that all people, men and women, are responsible to the same extent for their own salvation, and the claim (often expressed though not always realized) that women as well as men should be able to pray, preach, and perform Christian rituals. With gender distinctions thus downplayed, Urapmin Christianity suggests that it is blacks and whites, rather than women and men, who are most meaningfully different from one another.

It is clear, then, that as a result of conversion gender has become less salient than it once was in most of the key contexts of people's lives in Urapmin (on the notion of gender salience, see Chodorow, 1989: 217-218). It remains true, however, that in everyday life there are still important differences between men and women connected to the division of labor—men still hunt and clear gardens, and women still plant and weed gardens, for example. There are also some very basic norms of interaction that are different for men and women. Women tend to speak less than men in public, usually adopting a shy (*fitom*, lit. "shame") demeanor in mixed sex situations outside the family realm. But even as these differences continue to exist, people do not emphasize their wider import or discuss the ways they should organize the conduct of life in general.

In church discourse, men and women generally stress equal participation by both men and women, though this is rarely realized in practice. Men often say publicly that women should play just as active a role in church as men do, and they urge them to lead prayers, which they sometimes do, and to preach, which they only very rarely do. There are also women deacons, but their primary role appears to be to hear the private confessions of female members of the church. My reading of the role of gender in organizing church life is that interactional norms that work against women speaking in public work against the general Urapmin Christian ideological push for Christian equality.[4] Women who feel comfortable flouting the interactional norms are generally women who are older or, in one case, a woman who is the daughter of a prominent big man who has no sons or wives, and these women do find space to lead prayers or preach in church. Other women, however, while acknowledging that speaking formally in church is open to them, do not feel comfortable doing so.

Having noted the Christian discourse of equal church participation by women and men, I should also note that Urapmin men, and occasionally women, in other contexts give voice to the Pauline claim that the husband is the "head" of the wife. This is generally taken to refer to domestic contexts, rather than church ones, where it supports a husband's authority to make the general plan of work for his family. It is not much elaborated beyond bald statement, and does not issue in the kind of broader, cosmologically tinted view of gender differences that would make it the cornerstone of the kind of gender-organized view of the world that was so important in pre-Christian Urapmin. But it does

4. I once attended a mixed-sex discussion after a church service focused on the question of why more women and young people were not preaching. Since church members were convinced that the last days were soon to arrive, many church leaders felt women and young people should preach to strengthen the faith both of the community and of themselves. As the discussion developed, people began to make a novel distinction between "good shame", which helps prevent people from doing things they should not do, and "bad shame", which, more akin to English "shyness", keeps people from doing things they should do (*e.g.* preach). It is in such conversations that much of the conceptual work of Christian egalitarianism gets done in Urapmin, leaving its behavioral correlates to trail, often somewhat slowly, in their wake.

represent a resource for a discourse of Christian patriarchy that runs counter to the egalitarian one that is more prominent in religious contexts.

Turning back to the main focus of my discussion, the decline of gender as a salient organizing principle in Urapmin, and the rise of the relatively egalitarian Christian account of the religious sphere, has had a major influence on the development of the Spirit woman role. At the very least, it has cleared the public space that role requires by making it possible for women to claim religious expertise and lead religious rites. That women have been able to claim that space has in part been the result of the way in which possession by the Holy Spirit excuses them from the need to meet the dominant expectations concerning women's public behavior. Possessed by the Spirit and then giving voice to what it has shown them, they are not bound by the usual norms of modesty that inhibit most women from taking a lead role in church services. But even before they claim public space in that way, it has come to exist for them by virtue of the way Christianity has attenuated the salience of gender difference in Urapmin life—removing, for example, a strong sense that the world is made up of discrete men's and women's spaces—and for the most part removed gender from its previously important organizing role in the religious realm.

A final way I want to situate the rise of the Spirit women is in relation to what I see as the dominant trend of the change Christianity has introduced in Urapmin. I have elsewhere analyzed the change Christianity has brought to Urapmin in Dumont's terms as one in which individualism as a value has displaced relationalism as a value in the religious domain, even as relationalism continues to be dominant in other domains of Urapmin life. I do not have the space to lay out my reading of Dumont here, nor to sketch its application to the Urapmin situation in the kind of detail I have offered before (Robbins, 2004a). For present purposes, I hope it will be sufficient to define Christian individualism as a sole focus on the individual as the unit of salvation. It is individuals that are saved, not relationships, families, or other kinds of social groupings, and individuals are saved only on the basis of their own faith. This individualist value is distinct from the traditional value I have called "relationalism", which sees the creation of successful relationships, rather than successful individuals, as the primary goal toward which life should be organized. Spirit women are important in contemporary Urapmin in part, I want to argue, because they are apt figures of the kind of person this new value leads people to try to become, and also because in their rites they work to assure the continued religious dominance of individualism against the lingering claims of relationalism that are embodied in the behavior of indigenous spirits.

In claiming that the Spirit women are apt figures of the Christian individual, I have in mind particularly the way they are understood to function as speaking subjects. One of the realms in which the Urapmin have worked most assiduously at becoming Christian individuals is that of speech. In keeping with a general emphasis within Protestantism, the Urapmin have defined the individual speaker

as someone who speaks sincerely in all cases and who claims responsibility for what he/she has said. It is this kind of individual, one who is in control of his/her own speech, who is best outfitted to achieve salvation. This Protestant language ideology contrasts with a traditional Urapmin one in which speech is not seen to carry information about what the speaker thinks or feels and in which listeners are responsible for what they make of the utterances they hear (Robbins, 2001; Schieffelin, 2007; see also Keane, 2007 on Protestantism more generally). The strong opposition of the two language ideologies—which are almost inverse images of one another—has made the shift to Christian speaking difficult for most Urapmin, who regularly achieve it only in certain contexts such as that of prayer (Robbins, 2001; 2007). Spirit women, however, are widely represented as paragons of truthful speaking when they are speaking in the Spirit women role. As people often say, "you cannot speak behind the Spirit's back." This is understood to mean that one cannot doubt what Spirit women report about what the Holy Spirit has "shown" them when they are possessed. Their statements on these matters should always be taken as reliable. While other Urapmin face difficult challenges in learning to speak sincerely, people are generally confident that the Spirit women can and do speak in this way. In this respect, they model more than any other Urapmin the Christian individual as a speaker and this is an important part of the role they play in Urapmin culture.

In explaining how some women came to stand as paradigms of the individual Christian speaker, there is a traditional aspect of women's lives that is perhaps relevant. The one context in which the traditional language ideology that gave language no role in conveying people's thoughts and left interpretation up to the speaker was the custom of women "calling the name" (*win bakamin*) of the men they wanted to marry. In Urapmin, women propose, and they are supposed to choose whom they want to marry without any outside interference from adult relatives or suitors. When a woman is ready to announce her choice, she proceeds to indicate this through a number of ritualized steps and finally tells his name to an adult male relative. This man is bound to take her at her word—that is, to assume she is speaking sincerely and accurately—and to attempt to arrange the marriage with the boy's family. I will not here go into the details of the ritualized process by which this is carried out, or the discomfort ("shame") all those involved feel, though these details clearly demonstrate how anomalous this act of speaking is in relation to traditional Urapmin language ideology (see Robbins, 2008). For present purposes, it is enough to indicate that traditionally all women, at this one key point in their lives, were expected to speak in ways that are very much in accord with the ways Christian individuals are expected to speak. Moreover, in doing so they are expected to make precisely the kinds of personal choices Christian individuals are expected to make (and take responsibility for). Although this fact alone does not explain the rise of the whole Spirit woman institution, it does suggest one reason why women, rather than men, were best suited by their traditional inheritance to take on this role as it developed.

Turning from the way Spirit women speak to examine the content and goals of the rites they perform, we can note that many of these rites can be understood as defending the value of individualism against the claims relationalism still makes on people by way of its importance outside the religious realm. In order to analyze the activities of the Spirit women in this way, it is important to recognize that the traditional spirits they fight against represent the value of relationships. As the Urapmin traditionally understood matters, nature spirits were created before human beings and they are the original owners of all of the land the Urapmin live and garden on, all of the outstanding features of the environment they inhabit (streams, larger trees and rocks, caves, etc.), and the animals they hunt. The spirits allow people to use all of these things, but when they feel they have been disrespected by people—because people have laughed, or talked too loudly, or in other ways behaved offensively while using the resources that belong to the spirits, or because they have violated taboos that define how the spirit's resources can be used—they make people sick. They do so by clutching them with their hands and feet and refusing to let go. All illnesses of any severity in Urapmin are understood to be caused by nature spirits acting in this way.

As Gardner (1987) has pointed out about nature spirits among the Mianmin, another Min group, Urapmin spirits clearly represent the qualities that make human relationships conflictual: they can be generous, but are also prone to selfishness and overreaction that leads to dangerous hostility. Traditionally, Urapmin would respond to sicknesses caused by offended spirits by repairing their relationships with them by giving them a pig in sacrifice (*kang anfukaleng*) and asking them to take the smell of the pig and release the afflicted person. As they did so, they reaffirmed a core message of their relationalism that holds that it is crucial to make and repair relationships even when it is difficult to do so, for without relationships a person has no strength. [5]

One of the key planks of Urapmin Christianity is the claim that God made the earth and wants human beings to use it fully. Given this, people now suspect that the nature spirits, while they did predate human beings on Urapmin land, cannot count as its rightful owners. The abrogation of large parts of the taboo system is based in this new understanding. The more general result is that the nature spirits have lost all legitimate relational claims on the Urapmin. Yet as people see it, the spirits continue to make them sick (they have as yet no Christian or other "modern" understanding of where sickness comes from that they find convincing). This is what makes the work of the Spirit women so important, for their primary role is to deal with the sickness the nature spirits still cause by way of pressing their relational claims, illegitimate though they may be. After a

5. I have discussed nature spirits and sacrifice in these terms more fully in Robbins 2009. I also consider there the import of the fact that Spirit women do sometimes call for sacrifice—an issue I cannot consider in this paper.

person has been healed by a Spirit woman, he/she is left to function as an individual vis-à-vis the spirits—someone who can do what he/she wants without worrying about the relational bonds that once spiritually encumbered him/her.

The most common Spirit woman rites illustrate this point quite neatly. After the Holy Spirit shows the Spirit woman which spirit(s) is clutching a person, she lays hands on the person and prays strenuously to God to "banish" the spirit, to cut off its clutching hands and feet, and to bind it in hell where it can no longer press its relational claims on human beings. The grabbing of people the spirits engage in is a macabre parody of the idiom of "holding" (*kutalfugumin*) the Urapmin use to describe valued human relationships. In putting an end to it, and working to ensure that it does not recur, the Spirit women enact a powerful breaking of relationships that leave the person to stand for him or herself. Rites of clearing whole areas of spirits involve the same imagery of banishing and severing, and work to further enhance people's individual ability to inhabit and use the world as they choose. Freed of the burden of such relationships, it is little wonder that the Urapmin call the present era without taboos one of "free time." In banishing the spirits, the Spirit women work to extend the reach of this individualist model of social life among the Urapmin.

In the rites they perform in connection with mineral prospecting, the Spirit women further strike at the heart of the nature spirits' promotion of relationalism by enacting that most unlikely social forms: an individualist form of sacrifice. Mineral prospecting teams that visit Urapmin are looking primarily for gold. As the Urapmin understand it, the spirits are holding this gold and it is their failure to release it to the prospectors that has resulted in them not finding enough of it to begin mining operations in Urapmin. In light of this problem, Spirit women perform rites to clear spirits off of the land the prospectors will be working on, and these take the same form as those they use to cleanse villages and other areas of spiritual presence. On occasion, they have gone beyond this to lead rituals in which pigs are killed and given to the spirits, who are asked to take them and release the gold. In many structural respects, these rites can be seen as sacrifices in which the gold, which the spirits are holding, plays the role usually played by the patient, whom the spirits also hold. Yet there is one significant difference between these two kinds of rite (see Robbins, 1996). In routine sacrifices, the rite aims to heal a relationship that has been broken. In the rite exchanging pigs for gold, the aim is to break a relationship that has not previously been broken. In effect, the exchange of pigs for gold is framed as a market relationship undertaken by individuals each of whom will get what they desire and neither of whom will expect anything from the other in the future. In this way, the Spirit women's new form of sacrifice of pigs for gold is an attempt to directly substitute an individualist social form for a relational one and in doing so to individualize the spirit world as fully as the human one.

In this section, I have used the Spirit women as a lens for looking at how Christianity has shaped cultural change among the Urapmin. I have explored a

number of different factors that may have led to the rise of these women specialists in a culture that formerly allowed only men to occupy important religious roles. I have also situated the rituals the Spirit women carry out in relationship to the broader changes Christianity has brought to the Urapmin, suggesting that their prominence rests in part on the way they are able both to model and further institutionalize the individualism that has become the paramount value among Christian Urapmin. In bringing this last line of argument to a close, it is worth noting how poorly the famous explanation of female spirit possession offered by I. M. Lewis (2003 [1971]) fits the Urapmin case. Lewis holds that female spirit possession is often a "peripheral" kind of possession that depends on marginal, "outside" spirits, does not uphold traditional morality, and constitutes in essence a form of women's resistance to male domination. Possession of this kind stands in contrast to "central" men's cults, addressed to ancestors and involved in upholding community morality. Maxwell (1999: 201-203) has pointed out that Lewis's model does not neatly fit situations in which women become Holy Spirit mediums after conversion to Pentecostal or charismatic churches. For in these cases women are possessed by a central Spirit, one aspect of the divinity that underwrites male religious practice as well. Their mediumship also reinforces community morality in quite direct ways. In the Urapmin case, this takes the form of supporting the rising value of individualism against the relationalist threats it continues to face. In becoming mediums of the Holy Spirit, Spirit women thus move themselves to the center of Christianity in Urapmin, and they gain prestige and power by promoting and realizing to a greater extent than others the collectively held paramount value that Christianity promotes. In the next case we will examine, Christianity has also enabled women to develop new institutional bases of power, but this time by promoting their traditional values to a more central place in their culture more generally.

Church Women: Christianity and Gender in North Ambrym, Vanuatu

Ranon villagers of North Ambrym, Vanuatu have had an experience of Christianity that is very different than that of the Urapmin. First of all, their experience has been of much longer duration, since by the time the Urapmin conversion took place in 1977 they had already been Christian for roughly 80 years (Eriksen, 2008: 1). Secondly, the dominant church in Ranon is Presbyterian, and the village has never taken part in the kind of charismatic revival movement that so transformed Urapmin. As important as these differences are, they are not the ones I want to focus on here. Instead, I am most interested in the way we can understand the kind of change wrought by Christianity in Ranon as having been different at the level of cultural values. As Eriksen (2008: 3), on whose work I am drawing, has put it, while Christianity introduced a new value of individualism to Urapmin and initiated a struggle between individualism and

traditional relationalism, in Ranon Christianity did not challenge the value of relationalism, but rather it transformed the hierarchical relationship between male and female forms of realizing that value. In this section I will lay out the nature of Christian change in Ranon and look briefly at how it has changed women's lives.

At the center of Eriksen's analysis of the process of Christianization in Ranon is a distinction between two gendered kinds of action that serve to express the relationalism of Ranon culture. The male form of action, realized most fully in the male graded *mage* society, sees people drawing on their relationships to collect resources they present in their own name in actions in which they "personify" their relationships in their person. Because those who act in this way increase their personal prestige, this form of action is competitive and hierarchical. The female form of action, by contrast, stresses the creation of relationships and ultimately of community. It is built around movement and connection more than competition, and it eventuates not in the creation of personifications but of communities that can be taken to be social wholes (Eriksen, 2008: 7). Following Strathern (1988), Eriksen (2008: 7) notes that both men and women can act in male and female ways—it is the forms of action that are gendered, not in the first instance the persons who enact them. Yet it is also true that women, by virtue of their movement in marriage, are better equipped to realize the female form of action, and men, by virtue of their role in the mage and in other aspects of the ceremonial economy, find themselves directed more often to the male form.

Against this background, Eriksen shows in convincing detail that Christianization has transformed the Ranon value hierarchy in such a way as to make the previously subordinated female form of action the more valued one. Men initially showed interest in the Church, but when early missionaries insisted on maintaining an egalitarian, communal vision of Christianity—one in which women were encouraged to participate in church and men were not allowed to use the church as a forum for producing personifications of their own power—the men dropped the church and left it to the women. Having been given the church in this way, women found that its egalitarian, evangelistic ethos was well suited their own forms of action and they eagerly spread it as they moved and made new connections. Over the course of the 20th century, the church in Ambrym became the "most important social institution on the island" (Eriksen, 2008: 83). As it rose, it lifted the female form of action to the position of prominence in the value hierarchy that it currently enjoys.

What has this meant for the position of women in North Ambrym society? On a most general level, Christianity has formed a concerted social "movement" around the female form of action—a kind of action that always existed but that formerly had no self-consciously organized group to actively promote its practice (Eriksen, 2008: 96-7). Within the church, women can take formal roles, such as

that of elder, though they do so less often than men (Eriksen, 2008: 100). More importantly, women have formed their own group within the church and meet without men present, giving themselves social space to elaborate their relations to one another and their concerns (p. 113). Finally, they control church fund raising, an activity that has become the most important part of the prestigious, formerly male-dominated ceremonial economy (p. 113-14). As Eriksen analyzes in convincing detail, the church fundraising exchange rituals that women undertake have rendered women's part of the ceremonial economy a reflection of the value they place on their form of action and its product, which is the social whole rather than the personification of a single (male) person. Just as Urapmin Spirit women have developed a ritual that looks like the relationalist ritual of sacrifice but supports individualism, church women in Ranon have found a way to turn exchange rituals that look like those at the heart of the traditional, personification-oriented male ceremonial economy into performances that instead produce social wholes.

Looked at from the point of view of how values have changed, Christianization has had quite different effects in North Ambrym and Urapmin. In the former case, it has promoted a less valued form of social action to the top of the value hierarchy, while in Urapmin it has introduced a wholly new value and set it in conflict with the value that was traditionally paramount. It is interesting to note, however, that for women in both places the result has been similar in that women have been able to identify themselves very strongly with the currently most important religious value. Urapmin Spirit women are virtually the culture heroes of the new individualism, and this is why they loom so large in the thoughts of both men and women in Urapmin. Church women in Ranon have been able to set themselves at the very center of the community's most important social institution—the church—by making it one that expresses their values. There are differences in women's positions that follow from the nature of the values in play in the two cases. The Ranon emphasis on creating social wholes has given women strong institutional bases for their rising cultural importance in the form of the church and its women's group. The Spirit women, as befits the individualism they embody and work to extend, do not have such an institutional home. Although it is an argument for a different article, we probably see different kinds of Christianity with different ecclesiologies at work here (roughly Presbyterian, with its institutional emphasis on organizing churches into larger wholes, and Congregationalist, with less emphasis on institution building) as much as we see indigenous differences driving divergent paths of change. In the context of the current argument, what is more important to note is that although it has done it in different ways, in both Urapmin and Ranon Christianization has transformed the way women are positioned in relation to their cultures' dominant values. A brief look at a third case, one in which Christianity is not important, will help to put the import of this finding into perspective.

Passenger Women: Gender and Change in Huli

Wardlow (2006) has written an important study of gender and cultural change among the Huli of Southern Highlands Province, PNG. Although there are Christians among the 90,000 Huli, Christianity does not figure importantly in Wardlow's account of their history or current situation. Instead, she focuses on socioeconomic change and its effect on gender relations. I will assume her choice of emphasis reflects the situation on the ground in Huli, in the sense that socioeconomic changes and the cultural changes associated with them are more important in accounting for contemporary Huli life than are religious changes. This makes Wardlow's account an interesting contrast to my own and Eriksen's in that it allows us to speculate about what happens to women when modernizing changes occur without significant Christian input.

The socioeconomic situation in Huli is complex. Although subsistence gardening is still central to the lives of most Huli families, male out-migration to work for wages reaches extremely high levels (up to 45% of males between the ages of 20 and 39 are sometimes gone—Wardlow, 2006: 59), and the cash economy is an important part of Huli life. Although Wardlow does not conduct her analysis in terms of values or use the term "relationalism", it is not difficult to read her account of economic change in Huli as one in which a traditional emphasis on making relationships, and on the ways in which relationships constitute the person, is being challenged by the market economy's individualism. Their situation is thus like that of the Urapmin in important respects, with relationalism and individualism coming into conflict and people struggling to promote one or the other value as preeminent in various domains.

Against the background of her analysis of the rising importance of the market economy in Huli, Wardlow's (2006) ethnography focuses on those women, known as "passenger women", who leave home and have sex with many partners, often for money. Drawing on Wardlow's account, I will argue in this section that passenger women see their turn to sex work as a protest against the failure of their families to realize the value of relationalism by ensuring that justice has been upheld for the relationships that constitute their daughters, particularly the relationships surrounding marriage. [6]

In order to understand the motivations of the passenger women, and their connection to relationalism, it is necessary to consider how marriages are made in Huli. In Huli, marriages are completed by a gift of pigs, often as many as thirty, as bridewealth given by the side of the groom to the side of the bride. Bridewealth payments are at the very center of the Huli relational world (Wardlow, 2006: 167). Since bridewealth involves so many pigs, men who want

6. Wardlow (2004) compellingly uses her data to complicate scholarly uses of the term "sex work", but I will retain that term here, as she sometimes does herself, for ease of exposition.

to marry have to realize or further draw on many of their pre-existing relationships to gather the needed amount. When the daughters that result from their marriages get married in turn, these men will pay back those who helped them with the pigs they receive for her. At the same time, the payment of bridewealth legitimates the marriage, insuring that the children that result will be firmly fixed in the relational webs of their parents and creating important affinal relations between the kin of the groom and those of the bride. Finally, once a woman marries and her father is able to pay back those who helped with his bridewealth payment, her brothers are able to ask others for help assembling bridewealth payments of their own, hence further extending their own relational world and that of their kin.

Touching on so many relationships, bridewealth is central to the lives of everyone in Huli. But for women, it has a special meaning. Both Huli men and women say that "women are for bridewealth", suggesting that generating bridewealth through marriage is a key moment in a woman's life (p. 151). As Wardlow (p. 25) puts it, "women's sense of self-value is shaped by bridewealth, and it is difficult for most women to imagine legitimate female personhood outside the bridewealth system."

A crucial finding of Wardlow's study is that women become sex workers when they feel that those to whom they are related—and men in particular—do not work to maintain them or their sisters within the bridewealth system by demanding that appropriate exchanges be made for them. These neglected exchanges take several forms. If a woman has premarital sexual relations with a man or is sexually assaulted, her father or brothers should demand either that the man involved marry her and pay bridewealth, or that he make a lesser payment that will supplement the potentially smaller bridewealth she will command when she marries someone else. Once a woman is married and her father and brothers have distributed her bridewealth, they should also continue to honor their relationships to her, supporting her if her husband is violent to her or irresponsible. A husband, for his part, should treat marriage as an important relationship in its own right, nourishing it with a steady stream of gifts to his wife and children.

These days, with men out-migrating to find work and with cash having become more important for making all kinds of purchases, men often fail to honor the demands of the bridewealth system at one or more of these points. Fathers and brothers, who are either absent or do not feel they can muster enough of a fighting force to press their claims, sometimes do not demand compensation for premarital sexual relations or attacks. Nor do they always support their daughters against their husbands, leading many women to accuse them of "treating them like a market", which is to say selling them like a good that one has no interest in once it has been paid for. The increasing substitution of cash

for pigs in bridewealth payments, women feel, only exacerbates this problem, since debts established with cash tend to create less lasting relationships than those of pigs and hence allow a woman's bridewealth to sink from people's memory too quickly. Furthermore, husbands who are familiar with the cash economy, and often away themselves, sometimes treat their wives as if they are things which they have purchased with cash, rather than persons with whom they are constituted in a relationship. They give little, demand much, and when their wives complain they protest that they have paid for them and can thus treat them how they want. Often, it seems, they resort to violence, which is made even worse for the woman involved when, as mentioned above, their fathers and brothers do not come to their aid.

Women who have been disappointed in one or more of these ways become enraged, and it is such rage, they say, that leads some of them to take up sex work. The logic of this move is as follows: if the men in their lives refuse to help maintain the relational productivity of their sexuality and reproductive power within the bridewealth system, they will remove it from that system altogether and put it to use in enriching themselves. The men who turn their backs on the system are already pursuing their own individual pleasures at the expense of their relationships with their daughters, sisters, and wives, so when the women who stand in such relationships to them deploy their sexuality to similar ends, it is a case of turnabout as fair play. Note, however, that this turnabout is not a simple abandonment of the bridewealth system, for it only makes sense in relation to that system. As Wardlow (p. 150) notes, when women become sex workers, they do so because they are angry at the "failure of their kin to pursue traditional justice." That justice, as should be clear at this point, is a justice that consists in realizing, creating, and maintaining specific relationships tied to the bridewealth system: those of parents and children, siblings, affines, and spouses. The crucial place of relationships in this model of justice is driven home by Wardlow's observation that while women become angry when they are attacked sexually or in other ways, it is when their kin fail to make the relationships involved right by demanding recompense for the damage done to those relationships by the attack that this anger turns to the kind of rage that leads women to become sex-workers (p. 147). The institution of sex-work, then, is some women's response to their inability to realize relational values in a world more and more defined by the market and its individualist models of the good life.

In rebelling against the failure of the traditional social system structured by the value of relationalism, passenger women align themselves with that value and appear as conservative figures, unlike women from Ranon and Urapmin, both of whom align themselves with processes of change. One reason this might be so is that the new value of individualism has not as fully reorganized the socioeconomic sphere in Huli as the new values of individualism and female models of action have in the religious sphere of Urapmin and Ranon respectively.

There is more of a traditional order for women to defend in Huli than there is (at least in the religious domain) in the other two places. But the absence of a strong Christian input in the Huli case also seems likely to have contributed to its specificity. For in both of the other cases, it is Christianity that has encouraged women to understand themselves differently than they did in the past, something socioeconomic ideologies have not done for Huli women—at least not in ways they value. I do not have the space or data here to detail all of the ways Christianity has done this, but the stark difference between the way change has effected women in Huli and the way it has done so in Urapmin and Ranon indicates the promise of future research along these lines.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at the influence of Christianization on women's lives. I have done so through the lens of an approach to cultural change that defines changes in cultural values as central to processes of cultural transformation. Changes in values can take at least two different forms: new values can be introduced or the hierarchical relations between traditional ones can be rearranged. But in both cases it is the changes in values, I would suggest, that steer the direction of other changes. In the two cases of Christianization in PNG that I have examined, processes of value change have allowed women to occupy a place more closely aligned with their cultures' core values than they were able to before conversion. Urapmin Spirit women have done this by realizing more fully than others the individualist ideal, and by leading the battle against the nature spirits' efforts to enforce now less favored relationalist ideals. In Ranon, a consonance between women's traditional values and the values of the Christianity the missionaries introduced to their society opened up the opportunity for them to shift their values from a subordinated to a paramount place in their culture. The Huli case was one in which women have not succeeded in identifying with a new value, and thus find themselves militating for the maintenance of traditional values and the system of gender relations they underwrote. Their case served as a negative example meant to reinforce the claim that Christianity, as opposed to simply "modernizing" cultural change in general, can be seen to open up systems of gender relations to creative change in which women are able to align themselves with paramount values. It is hoped that with this point in mind this article can both be read as indicating the utility of the analysis of change based on value, and can stimulate further research into the ways Christianity is transforming gender relations in Melanesia.

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Spirit Women, Church Women, and Passenger Women: Christianity, Gender, and Cultural Change in Melanesia

As anthropologists increasingly study Christianity in Melanesia, data has become available which allow us to address comparative questions about its differential impact in various societies of the region. In this article, I look at how conversion to Christianity has transformed women's roles in one society in Papua New Guinea and one in Vanuatu. In particular, I examine what Christian values have meant for the construction of new gender roles. In addition, I compare changes in women's roles in these two Christianized societies to the situation in another rapidly changing Papua New Guinea society where Christianization is not a dominant social trend in order to explore how Christianity might be seen to align women with culturally dominant values in ways other kinds of cultural change do not. In the course of the article, I also consider what my analysis has to say about the value of comparing Christian societies across the Melanesian region for the broader project of theorizing the role of religion in shaping contemporary social transformations in this region and beyond.

Key words: Christianity, Gender, Cultural Change, Melanesia, value.

Femmes esprits, femmes d'église, femmes de passage : christianisme, genre et changement culturel en Mélanésie

Les anthropologues étudiant de plus en plus le christianisme en Mélanésie, nous disposons désormais des données permettant de questionner, d'un point de vue comparatif, les effets différenciés du christianisme dans plusieurs sociétés de la région. Dans cet article, je m'intéresse à la manière dont la conversion au christianisme a transformé le rôle des femmes dans une société de Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée et dans une autre au Vanuatu. J'examine plus particulièrement ce qu'ont signifié les valeurs chrétiennes pour la construction de nouveaux rôles de genre. En outre, je compare les changements des rôles des femmes dans ces deux sociétés christianisées avec la situation d'une autre société de Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée où les changements sont rapides mais où la christianisation n'est pas la tendance sociale dominante. Cette comparaison vise à préciser dans quelle mesure on peut considérer que le christianisme place les femmes en affinité avec les valeurs culturellement dominantes, tandis qu'un autre type de changement culturel ne produit pas cet effet. Dans le cours de

l'article, je me penche également sur ce que mon analyse nous dit quant à l'intérêt d'une comparaison entre différentes sociétés chrétiennes de Mélanésie, dans le cadre d'un projet plus large de théorisation du rôle que joue la religion dans les processus de transformation observables dans cette région et au-delà.

Mots-clés : christianisme, genre, changement culturel, Mélanésie, valeur.

Mujeres espíritus, mujeres de iglesia, mujeres de paso: cristianismo, género y cambio cultural en Melanesia

Dado que los antropólogos estudian cada vez más el cristianismo en Melanesia, disponemos ya de datos que permiten interrogar, desde una perspectiva comparativa, los efectos diferenciados del cristianismo en varias sociedades de la región. En este artículo, me inclinaré en la manera en la que la conversión al cristianismo ha transformado el rol de las mujeres en una sociedad de Papuasia Nueva Guinea y en otra en Vanuatu. Examinaré más particularmente lo que significaron los valores cristianos para la construcción de nuevos roles de género. Además, compararé los cambios de los roles de las mujeres en estas dos sociedades cristianizadas con la situación de otra sociedad de Papuasia Nueva Guinea, en la cual los cambios son rápidos pero donde la cristianización no es la tendencia social dominante. Esta comparación apunta a precisar hasta dónde se puede considerar que el cristianismo ubica a las mujeres en afinidad con los valores culturalmente dominantes, mientras que otro tipo de cambio cultural no produce este efecto. En el curso del artículo, me inclino igualmente por aquello que mi análisis nos dice en cuanto al interés de una comparación entre diferentes sociedades cristianas de Melanesia, en el marco de un proyecto más amplio de teorización del rol que juega la religión en el proceso de transformación observable en esta región y más allá.

Plabras clave: cristianismo, género, cambio cultural, Melanesia, valor.